

# Selections from The Arena, On Prayer

by St. Ignaty (Brianchaninov)

## CHAPTER 17: ON PRAYER

Prayer is the daughter of the fulfilment of the Gospel commandments, and is at the same time the mother of all the virtues, according to the general opinion of the Holy Fathers. Prayer produces virtues from the union of the human spirit with the Spirit of the Lord. The virtues which produce prayer differ from the virtues which prayer produces; the former are of the soul, the latter—of the spirit. Prayer is primarily the fulfilment of the first and chief commandment of those two, commandments in which are concentrated the Law, the Prophets and the Gospel. [1] It is impossible for a person to turn with all his thought, with all his strength and with all his being towards God, except by the action of prayer, when it rises from the dead and, by the power of grace, comes to life as if it received a soul. [2]

Prayer is the mirror of the monk's progress. [3] By examining his prayer a monk discerns whether he has attained salvation or is still in distress on the troubled sea of the passions outside the sacred harbour. As a guide to such discernment he has the divinely inspired David who, talking prayerfully to God, said:

*By this I know that Thou delightest in me,  
that my enemy does not triumph over me.  
And because of my innocence Thou hast helped me  
and secured me in Thy presence for ever. [4]*

This means: I have learned, O Lord, that Thou hast shown me kindness and hast taken me to Thyself on account of my constant and victorious rejection, by the power of prayer, of all enemy thoughts, images and feelings. This kindness of God to man appears when a person feels kindness and mercy towards all his neighbours and forgives all offenders.

Prayer should be a monk's chief task. It should be the centre and heart of all his activities. By means of prayer a monk clings to the Lord in the closest manner and is united in *one spirit* with the Lord. [5] From his very entry into the monastery, it is essential to learn to pray properly, so that in prayer and by means of prayer he may work out his salvation. Regularity, progress and proficiency [6] in prayer are opposed by our corrupt nature and by the fallen angels who strive their utmost to keep us in their slavery, in the fallen state of aversion from God which is common to men and fallen angels.

## CHAPTER 18: ON PREPARATION FOR PRAYER

On account of the signal importance of prayer, preparation should precede its practice.

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- [St. Theophan the Recluse On Prayer](#)
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*Before praying, prepare yourself; and be not as one who tempts the Lord.* [1] 'When we are going to stand in the presence of our King and God and converse with Him,' says St. John of the Ladder, 'let us not rush into it without preparation, lest seeing from afar that we are without the weapons and clothing required for standing in the presence of the King, He should order His servants and slaves to bind us and banish us far from His presence and tear up our petitions and fling them in our face.' [2]

The first preparation consists in rejecting resentment and condemnation of our neighbours. This preparation is commanded by our Lord Himself: *When you stand praying, He orders, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father, Who is in heaven may forgive you your offenses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father Who is in heaven forgive you your offenses.* [3] Further preparation consists in the rejection

of cares by the power of faith in God and by the power of obedience and surrender to the will of God; also a realization of one's sinfulness and the resultant contrition and humility of spirit. The one sacrifice which God accepts from fallen human nature is contrition of spirit. *If Thou hadst desired sacrifice, I would have given it;* says His Prophet to God on behalf of everyone who has fallen and remains in his fallen state. It is not merely some partial sacrifice of body or soul, but even total *holocausts do not please Thee. The sacrifice for God is a contrite spirit; a contrite and humble heart God will not despise.* [4] St. Isaac the Syrian repeats the following saying of another holy father: 'If anyone does not recognize himself as a sinner, his prayer is not acceptable to God.'

Stand at prayer before the invisible God as if you saw Him, and with the conviction that He sees you and is looking at you attentively. Stand before the invisible God just as a guilty criminal convicted of countless crimes and condemned to death stands before a stern, impartial judge. Exactly! You are standing before your sovereign Lord and Judge; you are standing before the Judge in Whose sight *no living soul will be justified.* [5] Who always *wins when He is judged,* [6] Who does not condemn only when, in His unspeakable love for men, He forgives a man his sin and *enters not into judgment with His servant.* [7] Feeling the fear of God, and feeling from the action of this fear the presence of God when you pray, you will see without seeing, spiritually, Him Who is invisible, and you will realize that prayer is a standing by anticipation at the awful judgment of God. [8]

Stand at prayer with bowed head, with your eyes cast to the ground, on both legs equally and without moving; assist your prayer by sorrow of heart, sighs from the depth of your soul, and abundant tears. A reverent outward demeanour at prayer is most essential and most helpful for all wrestling at the work of prayer, especially for beginners in whom the disposition of the soul conforms largely to the posture of the body.

The Apostle orders thanksgiving when we pray: *Persevere in prayer,* he says, *and keep wakeful in it with thanksgiving.* [9] The Apostle says that thanksgiving is ordered by God Himself: *Pray without ceasing; give thanks for everything, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* [10] What is the meaning of thanksgiving? It means praising God for His

countless blessings, poured out on all mankind and on everyone. By such thanksgiving the soul is filled with a wonderful peace; and she is filled with joy in spite of the fact that sorrows beset her on all sides. By thanksgiving a man acquires a living faith so that he rejects all worry about himself, tramples on fear of men and devils, and surrenders himself wholly to the will of God.

Such a disposition of the soul is an excellent preparatory disposition for prayer. *Therefore since you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, says the Apostle, so walk in Him* (live in Him), *rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in it by thanksgiving*, that is, by means of thanksgiving obtaining an abundance of faith. [11] *Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say it, Rejoice! ... The Lord is near. Be anxious about nothing, but in every circumstance, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.* [12] The importance of the spiritual effort of thanksgiving is explained with particular fullness in 'Direction in the Spiritual Life' by the holy Fathers Barsanuphius and John.

## **CHAPTER 19: ON ATTENTION AT PRAYER**

Prayer requires the inseparable presence and co-operation of the attention. With attention prayer becomes the inalienable property of the person praying; in the absence of attention it is extraneous to the person praying. With attention, it bears abundant fruit; without attention it produces thorns and thistles. [1]

The fruit of prayer consists in illumination of mind and compunction of heart, in the quickening of the soul with the life of the Spirit. Thorns and thistles are a sign of deadness of soul and pharisaical self-esteem which springs from the hardening of a heart which is contented and elated by the quantity of the prayers and the time spent in reciting those prayers.

The rapt attention which keeps prayer completely free from distraction and from irrelevant thoughts and images is a gift of God's grace. We evince a sincere desire to receive the gift of grace—the soul-saving gift of attention—by forcing ourselves to pray with attention whenever we pray. Artificial attention, as we may call our own unaided attention unassisted by grace, consists in enclosing our mind in the words of the prayer, according to the advice of St. John of the Ladder. If the mind, on account of its newness to the work of prayer, gets out of its enclosure in the words, it must be led back into them again. The mind in its fallen state is naturally unstable and inclined to wander everywhere. But God can give it stability and will do so in His own time in return for perseverance and patience in the practice of prayer. [2]

Specially helpful in holding the attention during prayer is an extremely unhurried pronounciation of the words of the prayer. Pronounce the words without hurrying so that the mind may quite easily stay enclosed in the words of the prayer, and not slip away from a single word. Say the words in an audible voice when you pray alone; this also helps to hold the attention.

It is particularly easy to practise attentive prayer when performing the rule of prayer in one's cell, and one should train oneself to do so. Beloved brother, do not refuse the yoke of a certain amount of monotony and compulsion in accustoming yourself to the exercises of your monastic cell and especially to the rule of prayer. Arm yourself in good time with the all-powerful weapon of prayer. Accustom yourself to the practice of prayer while you have the opportunity.

Prayer is all-powerful on account of the all-powerful God Who acts in it. *It is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.* [3] 'Prayer by its nature is communion and union of man with God; by its action it is the reconciliation of man with God, the mother and daughter of tears, a bridge for crossing temptations, a wall of protection from afflictions, a crushing of conflicts, boundless activity, the spring of virtues, the source of spiritual gifts, invisible progress, food of the soul, the enlightening of the mind, an axe for despair, a demonstration of hope, release from sorrow, the wealth of monks.' [4]

At first we must force ourselves to pray. Soon prayer begins to afford consolation, and this consolation lightens the coercion and encourages us to force ourselves. But we need to force ourselves to pray throughout our life, [5] and few indeed are the ascetics who, on account of the abundant consolation of grace, never need to force themselves.

Prayer acts murderously on our old man, the unregenerate self or nature. As long as it is alive in us, it opposes prayer like death. [6] Fallen spirits, knowing the power of prayer and its beneficial effect, endeavour by all possible means to divert us from it, prompting us to use the time assigned to prayer for other occupations; or else they try to annul it and profane it with mundane distractions and sinful inattention, by producing at the time of prayer a countless swarm of earthly thoughts, sinful day-dreams and reveries, imaginings and fantasies.

## **CHAPTER 20: ON THE CELL RULE**

The cell rule consists in a certain number of prostrations, in a certain number of prayers and psalms, and in the practice of the Prayer of Jesus. It is fixed for each person according to his powers of body and soul. As these powers vary indefinitely in individuals, the rule is offered to ascetics [1] in the most varied forms. The general principle for the rule of prayer consists in this, that it should on no account exceed the ascetic's strength, or sap that strength, or undermine his health and so force him to give up every kind of rule.

Abandoning the rule of prayer is generally the result of a rule, adopted or imposed, which is beyond one's strength. On the other hand, a moderate and prudent rule remains a monk's property for the whole of his life, goes on developing and growing naturally till the end of his life, and gains character both in outward form and inner value according to his progress.

For a strong and healthy body a rule requiring a greater number of prostrations and a larger quantity of prayer is indicated, and less for a weak body. Human bodies differ so much from one another in strength and capacity that some are more exhausted by thirty

prostrations than others are by three hundred.

## **CHAPTER 21: CONCERNING BOWS**

Bows are divided into bows to the ground and bows from the waist. [1] They are generally appointed for the evening rule before going to bed. It is best to make bows before reading the evening prayers, that is, to begin the rule with bows. Bows tire and warm the body to some extent and reduce the heart to a state of contrition in such a state, the ascetic prays with greater zeal, warmth and attention. The prayers have quite a different taste when they are read or said after bows.

Bows must be made extremely unhurriedly for the bodily labour must be animated by mourning of heart and prayerful cries of grief on the part of the mind. When about to make prostrations, give your body a most reverent attitude, such as a slave and creature of God should have in the presence of his Lord and God. Then collect your thoughts from wandering everywhere, and with extreme unhurriedness, just aloud to yourself, enclosing the mind in the words, and from a contrite and humble heart, say the prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*. Having said the prayer, unhurriedly make a prostration, with reverence and the fear of God, without excitement, with the feeling of a person repenting and asking for the forgiveness of his sins, as if you were at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Do not picture to yourself in your imagination the form or figure of the Lord, but have a conviction of His presence; have a conviction that He is looking at you, at your mind and heart, and that His reward is in His hand. The former is impermissible fancy, which leads to disastrous self-deception; but a conviction of the presence of the omnipresent God is a conviction of a most holy truth. Having made the prostration, bring the body to reverence and calm again, and again say unhurriedly the above prayer; then make a prostration again in the way described above.

Do not worry about the number of bows. Pay all your attention to the quality of your prayer performed with prostrations. Without speaking of the effect on the spirit, a small number of bows made in the way described above will have a much greater effect on the body itself than a large number made hurriedly, without attention, for quantity.

Experience will soon prove this. When you get tired, pass from prostrations to bows from the waist. The extent of the bow from the waist is fixed by this, that when making it, the extended hand should touch the ground or floor.

Regarding it as one's imperative duty in making bows to ensure the soul's abundant working which consists in attentiveness, unhurriedness, reverence, and the intention to offer penitence to God, the ascetic will soon discover the quantity of bows his constitution can stand. By slightly reducing this number as a concession to his weakness, He can make a daily rule for himself: and when it has been approved and blessed by his spiritual father or his superior, or by a monk whom he trusts and whose advice he follows, he can perform the rule daily.

For the spiritual guidance of our beloved brethren we shall not be silent about the

following: bows performed for number, and not animated by the right working of the mind and heart, are more harmful than profitable. Having performed them, the ascetic begins to rejoice. 'There,' he says to himself like the Pharisee mentioned in the Gospel, 'God has granted me again today to make (say) 300 prostrations! Glory to God! Is that an easy matter? In these times, 300 prostrations! Who keeps such a rule nowadays?' And so on. We must remember that bows heat the blood, and by heating the blood excessively, they help to stimulate mental activity. Having reached such a state, the poor ascetic, just because he has no idea of the soul's true working, surrenders to mental activity harmful to the soul, surrenders to vainglorious thoughts and fancies, based on his ascetic labour, through which he thinks he is making progress. The ascetic enjoys these thoughts and fancies, cannot have enough of them, adopts them, and so plants within himself the fatal passion of conceit. Conceit soon begins to make its appearance in the secret condemnation of neighbours and in an open disposition to preach to them. Obviously such a disposition is a sign of pride and self-deception; unless a monk considered himself above his neighbour, he would never dare to teach him. Such is the fruit of all bodily labour, unless it is animated by the intention to repent and unless it has repentance as its sole aim, if the labour is given a value in itself.

True monastic progress consists in this, that the monk sees himself to be the most sinful of all men. 'A brother said to Saint Sisoës the Great, "I see that my thought is constantly with God." The holy man replied "It is no great thing that your thought is unceasingly with God; it is a great thing when a monk sees himself beneath every creature."' Such was the manner of thought of the true servants of God, true monks. It was formed in them from the right working of the soul. Accompanied by the right working of the soul, even bodily labour has vast significance, being the expression of repentance and humility by acts of the body. *See my humility and my labour, and forgive me all My sins*, [2] cries holy David prayerfully to God, combining in his pious effort bodily labour with deep penitence and profound humility.

## **CHAPTER 22: ON ADAPTING THE CELL RULE TO THE MONASTIC RULE**

In some Russian communities—extremely few—which follow the rule of Sarov Monastery, the evening rule is performed in church with bows. In some cenobitic monasteries the rule is performed without bows. In the majority of monasteries the evening rule is left to the choice of the brethren, and is performed in the cells by those who wish to do so. In Sarov Monastery, and in other communities which follow its rule, the labours are so considerable that, over and above the church rule, hardly any of the brethren can perform the cell rule. But some have great bodily strength, so that the physical labours even of Sarov and Valaam monasteries are not enough to exhaust their bodies, so vigorous are their constitutions.

For those who have a superabundance of strength, or live in communities in which the rule is not combined with bows, or where there is no common evening rule, we offer the following humble advice: the evening rule should be adapted to the rule given by the

Angel to Saint Pachomius the Great. It should be adapted because at the present time, both on account of our feebleness and on account of the generally accepted rules in our monasteries, it is impossible for us to accomplish fully and exactly the rule given by the Angel to suit the monks of antiquity. What we have said should cause no offense. Our own monastic discipline is also blessed from on high; it corresponds with our weakness and our time. In conformity with what is prescribed by the rule taught by the Angel, the cell rule can assume the following order: Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee. Heavenly King; Trisagion; Our Father; Lord have mercy (12); Come let us worship ... Psalm 50; the Creed. Then the Jesus Prayer; Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

With the Jesus Prayer some make twenty prostrations and twenty bows from the waist, others make thirty prostrations and thirty bows, others forty prostrations and forty bows, and so on. It is useful to add some prostrations and bows to the prayer to the Mother of God: My most holy Lady, Mother of God, save me a sinner. After finishing the appointed number of prostrations and bows, one must on no account remain idle and allow the mind and heart to turn indiscriminately to whatever thoughts and feelings present themselves; one should pass immediately to the set prayers or the Jesus Prayer. Having performed the bodily labour and thereby warmed the body and blood, the ascetic gets a special disposition for spiritual activity as was said above, and unless he at once gives his soul correct and saving activity, it can easily turn to wrong and fatal activity, to vain and harmful considerations and fancies. The fruit obtained by correct bodily labour must be guarded with care and used with profit. The invisible thieves and enemies never sleep! Our own fallen nature will not be slow to produce the weeds [1] that are native to it. The purity, alertness of mind and compunction of heart obtained by prayer with prostrations must at once be used for prayer without bows, said with the lips unhurriedly and quietly, aloud to oneself, with the enclosure of the mind in the words of the prayer, and with the sympathy of the heart with the words of the prayer.

In communities where the evening rule is not performed in church but in the cells, the Prayers Before Sleep should be read after bows. Besides this, those who wish and who feel that they are strong enough read akathists, canons, the Psalter and the intercession. [2] We must remember that the essence of the work of prayer consists not in the quantity of the prayers read but in reading such prayers as are read with attention and with the sympathy of the heart, so that a deep and strong impression may be left on the soul. [3]

The quantity of prayers needed for the rule is ascertained in the same way as the quantity of bows. Read with due attention and deliberation some prayers which you consider specially nourishing for your soul. Having noted the time the reading took and having figured out how much time you can give to prayer or psalm-reading, make a suitable cell rule of prayer. The reading of the akathists to sweetest Jesus and the Mother of God acts very beneficially on beginners, while for those who have made some progress and have already experienced some illumination of the mind, the reading of the Psalter is to be recommended. For the attentive reading of one Kathisma about twenty minutes is required. The holy Fathers performed the prayerful reading of the psalms and other set-

prayers with such unhurriedness—which is indispensable for attention and for enclosing the mind in the words of the prayer—that they called this reading psalmody or psalm-singing. Psalmody is not singing tunes or music at all, but extremely unhurried reading which by its slowness resembles singing.

In those communities where the evening rule is performed in church without bows, after completing the rule with bows one should engage not in psalmody but in prayer and on no account allow oneself to be distracted by vain and soul-harming thoughts and fancies. Those monks who for some reason are often forced to stay in their cell without going out, perform the rule with bows on rising from sleep before the morning prayers on account of the beneficial effect of bows on both body and soul as we have explained above.

### ***Endnotes***

#### **Chapter 17**

1. St. Matthew 22:37-40.
2. *Ladder*, 28:45.
3. *Ibid.* 28:34.
4. Ps. 40:12-13.
5. I Cor. 6:17.
6. There are only two words in the original and both are ambiguous. The first may mean *regularity* or *correctness*, the second means *progress*, *success*, or *proficiency*. We have given a double translation to the second word only.

#### **Chapter 18**

1. Ecclus. 18:23.
2. *Ladder* 28:3.
3. St. Mark 11: 25.
4. Ps. 50:17.
5. Ps. 124:2.
6. Ps. 50:4.
7. Ps. 142:2.
8. *Ladder* 28:1.
9. Col. 4:2. cp. Phil. 4:6.
10. Thess. 5:17.
11. Col. 2:6-7.
12. Phil. 4:4-6.

#### **Chapter 19**



1. Gen. 3:17; Heb. 6:8. Thorns and thistles of conceit and hypocrisy, self-delusion and formality (2 Tim. 3:5). *Ladder* 28:17.
2. Ephes. 6:17.
3. *Ladder* 28:1, quoted freely with omissions.
4. *Alphabetical Patrology and Memorable Sayings of Abba Agatho*, ch. 9.
5. Cp. 'Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh, the fallen self-life, with its passions and desires.' (Gal. 5:24.)

#### **Chapter 20**

1. *ascetics* here means anyone who wishes to live the spiritual life.

#### **Chapter 21**

1. Lit. 'ground-bows and belt-bows.'
2. Ps. 24: 18.

#### **Chapter 22**

1. Mat. 13:25.
2. This intercession is usually called 'Commemoration of the Living and the Departed' in Russian Prayer Books; and generally comes immediately after the 'Prayers on Rising from Sleep'.
3. St. Symeon the New Theologian, 'On the Three Ways of Prayer'.

From *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, by Bishop Ignatius (Brianchaninov), translated from the Russian by Archimandrite Lazarus (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1991), pp. 66-78. This is one of the most important books for our times on the spiritual life. Do not let the title fool you. Though written primarily as an "offering to contemporary [late 19th century] monasticism," it contains much wisdom for laypeople as well. *The Arena* represents a portion of the works written late in his life, reflecting his extensive experience, balance, and patristic wisdom. This book cannot be too highly recommended for all serious Orthodox Christians.